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ABSTRACT

Alternative educational programs can meet the needs of students for whom traditional educational methods are inadequate at less than it would cost to modify the standard educational programs to accommodate all student types. Although such programs have grown more visible in the United States in recent years, alternatives have been available since colonial days. Students whose needs are not met in traditional programs often lose self-confidence and adopt counter-productive behaviors. To helps such students, alternative programs must maintain awareness of their own transitional natures, their role among mutually supportive institutions, and their responsibility for teaching students to control their own lives. Alternative programs might prove most valuable for dealing with disruptive students. Program effectiveness can be measured by how well students are prepared for participating in society; thus, academic and behavior measures are appropriate. Results so far have been inconclusive but have suggested that further research into alternative program effectiveness could prove advantageous. Clearer goals, more thorough planning, and increased consistency and community involvement appear essential. Experience also suggests that alternative programs should operate within established administrative and curricular structures, and that evaluation measures should be included in planning. (PGD)

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SPECIAL RECOGNITION

A special recognition is given to Hess, Martin Beck and Parker for their Study of Alternative Schools and reported in ERIC (Educational Resource Information Center) November 1979.

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL - PROGRAMS

Public education faces many challenges in attempting to achieve its goal of assisting youth in their academic and social development. One of the major challenges and concerns throughout public schools across the country is the teenage dropout rate. A question that has plagued school administrators from Maine to California is what can be done for students who are so alienated from the traditional school approach that dropping out becomes inevitable? Needless to say, teenagers who do not complete their secondary education, who do not possess academic or skill-training credentials, will be more likely to experience difficulties in meeting life's tasks than those who possess such credentials. How can public secondary education deal directly and effectively with the increasing problem of drop-outs?

Alternative education programs have been established in many school districts as an honors program for gifted students, while other school districts have established programs from academic remediation. Although neither program deals with school-alienated youth, alternative education programs can be established for this purpose: to provide a non-traditional school atmosphere for secondary students who wish to complete their education but are unable to function productively in their home school because of behavioral and attitudinal conflicts.

Different kinds of schools for different kinds of learners may be the wave of the future. Recognizing, as most educators do, that each student learns in his or her own way, the alternative programs in many

school districts go beyond the idea of individualization within the classroom.

Alternative programs frequently arise out of a sense of failure - a sense that the regular program has failed an important student segment: the alienated, the gifted, the vocationally-oriented, and the blessed average.

The major goal for the Alternative School is to assist a student in continuing in an educational setting until high school requirements are satisfied, or skills and attitudes for worthwhile participation in society are developed.

More specific goals include improving the student's educational and basic learning skills; engaging students in a program which will develop a more positive self-image and thus improve personal and social adjustments; involving students in career and vocational exploration; reducing truancy and delinquency among those students enrolled; counseling each student toward a successful placement in the home school, vocational school, or full-time employment; and, providing instructional opportunities for high school graduation when returning to the home school, the GED, and/or job readiness skills.

Whether alternative school programs are merely symptomatic of a feeling of restlessness and dissatisfaction in our society today, or whether they in fact herald a subtle but basic change in our concept of education remains to be seen. What is evident is the fact that alternative schools are growing in number every year in this country. As the very word implies, alternative schools are "alternatives" to existing schools and institutions. In an alternative school, the community or the local school district should determine what the unique design and profile of the school or program will be.

The Evolution of Alternative Education

Although interest in alternative schools has undergone a marked revival during recent years, the concept is hardly new to American education. Many colonial schools, especially those in New York and other northern areas, were founded as alternatives to English institutions. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pattern of establishing American alternatives to European models eventually encouraged the development of educational alternatives to established models. Thus, Roger Williams established the schools of Rhode Island when the educational system of Massachusetts no longer suited his beliefs.

As the nation moved west during the nineteenth century, the number of alternative schools first increased, then stabilized. In the early years of the century a seemingly endless variety of religious groups, political organizations, and clubs developed educational institutions to serve and further their interests. The economic dislocation of the post-Civil War period curtailed much of this growth, yet private schools survived as a major component of the national educational community.

The twentieth century has seen alternative education assume new forms. As the cost of schools has risen, their maintenance has increasingly become a public responsibility. While various societal and philosophical patterns have continued to foster the development of private alternatives, in many areas, non-traditional education has also attracted the interest of public educators. Public involvement in alternative learning has taken numerous forms. In some instances, actual demonstration programs have been implemented by urban, rural, and suburban districts. In other cases, public schools have borrowed

teaching techniques and organizational principles which were already tested in private institutions.

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of thousands of institutions purporting to be alternatives to conventional forms of education. The aims of these schools have varied. Some have attempted to serve the special interests and capabilities of the gifted and talented. Others have dealt with students who presented discipline problems. Still others emphasized special career programs.

Most alternative schools have been based on the assumption that certain types of students are best served outside the limits of the traditional classroom. The reasoning behind this assumption is two-fold. On one hand, it is concluded that the broad demographic base of the regular classroom makes it ill-suited to the needs of individuals who have special abilities and/or problems. With the range of needs present in the classroom it is impossible to deal adequately with cases which require added attention. On the other hand, it is believed that stretching regular curricula to serve such individuals would weaken the effectiveness of such programs. If meeting the needs of these students occurs at the expense of the larger population, the goal may not be worth the price.

From these theoretical bases, alternative schools emerge as adjuncts to conventional schooling. They become means for individual districts or groups of districts to have their proverbial cake and eat it too, to provide for specific types of students without disrupting central programs.

The obvious attractiveness of such an approach to education has led to the establishment of alternative schools in areas throughout the nation. The results of these efforts, a mixture of stunning

successes and dismal failures, have demonstrated that much remains to be understood about this method of learning. Demonstration programs of varying forms continue to be implemented, and several more years may pass before alternative schools advance beyond the experimental stage.

Gary G. Wehlage, Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Madison is responsible for developing a Phi Delta Kappa Fastback entitled Effective Programs for the Marginal High School Student. Wehlage makes a succinct point when he indicates that most public high schools have a group of students who feel that they cannot experience success in school. From coast to coast, regardless of the neighborhood, family background and general intelligence of the students a high school draws on, achievement. Our schools, which reflect society, honors success, competition, and achievement and it is understandable that some students will see themselves, or be perceived by others, as losers. Wehlage refers to these groups as "marginal students" and suggests that they do not refer to any set of characteristics based on intelligence or social class. Instead, the category of marginal students includes a broad range of adolescents, some bright and others less so, who find themselves unsuccessful, unhappy, and often unwelcome in school.

Typically, the marginal student is in the bottom 25% of the class as measured by grade point average. Frequently such students have failed courses and are behind in acquiring the credits needed to graduate. Some lack basic skills needed to succeed in school. Their attitude and conduct is likely to get them in trouble with teachers and administrators. The most frequent offenses committed by these students are refusal to do academic work, smoking in the schools, coming to school under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and truancy.

According to many educators, truancy is the most significant problem for the marginal student because it is likely to lead to failing courses, which in turn makes graduation difficult and even unlikely. The lack of success in school pulls the marginal student into a downward spiral of negative experiences with teachers, administrators, and parents. Some marginal students drop out, others may stick it out for four years but never graduate, and still a few others may graduate or eventually receive a diploma through an adult education program. Nevertheless, this group of adolescents gains little from the formal system of secondary education, and most of them acquire a negative attitude about formal education.

Wehlage directed his study toward six effective school programs in Wisconsin that provide some insights into the education of those who have traditionally failed to stay in school. The six programs studied were:

1. Reuther Education at Large (REAL) - Kenosha, Wisconsin
2. Lincoln Educational Alternative Program (LEAP) - Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin
3. Paper High School (PHS) Oconomowac, Wisconsin
4. School Within a School (SWS) Janesville, Wisconsin
5. Alternative Learning Program (ALP) - McFarland, Wisconsin
6. Academic Development Opportunity Program (ADOP) Milwaukee West Division High School Milwaukee, Wisconsin

When we look at alternative programs, schools and schedules, it is important that we identify them hopeful ventures - - it is in this spirit that these three perspectives seem to be essential to the con-

tinuing development and maturation of the alternative school movement.

1. Alternative school programs must see themselves as transitional, not as an end in themselves, but as flexible, changeable institutions, as expendable forms that will facilitate the transition to the education of the future. Part of this process involves learning from the young who are already making adaptations to the speed up, atomic, electronic, laser beam, one-world universe.

2. Alternative school programs see themselves as part of a network of other mutually supportive institutions as well.

3. Most important perhaps, alternative school programs must maintain the distinction between education for empowerment and education for control and an attempt to practice the former. To blur this distinction would be to destroy the basis for alternatives, because alternatives mean real choice. The initial impetus of alternatives is a freeing impluse from the impersonality, the rigidity, and oppressive practices of the public school system and, if you please, the larger social system of which the schools are a part.

The ultimate goal of alternative practices is not to control people more effectively -- but to enable them to exercise control, to recognize their basic human right to transform their lives and institutions. This is why we spend so much time talking about the quality of participation.

At the present time, it seems clear that the public schools, that great network which forms the basis of American education, have become ground on which the value or lack of value of alternative schools will be demonstrated or disproved. A view of experiences already gained in this area lends insights into directions and attainments of the movement of this time.

Directions of Alternative Education

Non-traditional education continues to be a multi-faceted endeavor. The gifted, the vocationally-oriented, and the disruptive have become

clientele for a range of alternative schools. Increasingly, however, it has become apparent that public schools cannot and should not implement wholly separate curricula for all categories of students with special needs.

The education of the gifted is a particular case in point. Interest in students with varying degrees of talent has mushroomed during recent years. While many school systems have attempted to further the social and emotional, as well as the intellectual, growth of gifted children by integrating advanced learning with established social and curricular patterns, a few have attempted to establish wholly segregated programs. Authorities on the gifted have concluded, however, that if special, separate programming is required in this area, it is best implemented on the campus, rather than in the district. The local district usually does not possess the resources to develop sophisticated training for the very brightest of school students.

Vocationally-oriented students are another group which may be difficult to serve through alternative curricula within public school districts. Career training is one area of learning which, even in the elementary stages, frequently require sophisticated, expensive equipment. Often, such equipment is beyond the means of individual districts. Accordingly, alternative education in this area has frequently taken the form of cooperative arrangements spanning several individual systems. In a number of instances, such pooling arrangements have made possible the development of curricula far beyond the means of small districts.

If alternative programs such as the education of the gifted and vocational training seem beyond the means of a single school system, other non-traditional programs seem to hold the possibility, if not the promise of success. Objectives which are limited in scope and require

modest commitments of resources are within the realm of implementation in individual districts.

One such area is the education of disruptive students. This is one concern which has often been conveniently overlooked by the American school community. Interest in the nature of course content has frequently upstaged concern with less glamorous topics such as student behavior. The contrast between the ease of implementing new curricula and the difficulty of dealing with disruptive individuals has probably also contributed to the pattern. Gallup polls and other opinion surveys have demonstrated that discipline continues to be a major, if not the primary difficulty currently facing public education. As such, discipline constitutes an excellent concern for alternative schools to address.

As implemented in many areas of the nation, alternative programs which deal with student discipline perform a dual function. As separate programs, they offer instructions geared to the special learning and behavioral patterns of disruptive students. In this context, they employ techniques and teaching strategies not suited to the regular classroom. By removing disorderly students from classrooms, alternatives schools also help improve the academic environment in those settings. With the need to deal with extreme behavior problems eliminated, large groups of students may more easily concentrate on the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills.

Other forms of the alternative school also exist. In some areas, the approach has emphasized multicultural and/or multi-ethnic instruction. In others, training in the so-called basic skills has formed the curriculum. Data on all of these approaches continues to be accumulated. From the present perspective, it seems that the type

of alternative program chosen is highly dependent on the precise needs of the individual district. Obviously certain programs, such as those for the gifted and the vocationally-oriented, are beyond the means of most school systems. Multicultural and basic skills training are within the reach of any areas, if it is concluded that such instruction cannot be accomplished within established curricula.

Alternative schools for the disruptive students, of all of the approaches outlined above, probably have the widest applicability. Rising concerns with school discipline indicate that the public may demand increasing experimentation in this area.

Under these circumstances, it seems profitable to examine the record of alternative programs which totally or partially deal with disciplinary problems. Through such a consideration, insights concerning these efforts, as well as the more general character of the alternative approach, may emerge.

Outcomes of Alternative Schools

Like those of standard educational mechanisms, the outcomes of alternative schools may logically be divided according to the aims of the programs. While no two of these efforts share precisely the same goals, the themes of academic and behavioral progress receive frequent emphasis. Accordingly, a general analysis of the results of alternative education inevitably concentrates on these two factors.

Evaluation of the academic outcomes of alternative schools presents a number of problems. Authorities point out that the use of non-traditional methods of testing, in many programs, makes comparison difficult. It has been noted that these efforts often resist measurement on traditional scales. If alternative programs are to prepare individuals for

life in the larger society, however, it is imperative that some standardization of testing be attained. If this could not be accomplished, the learning accomplished in these programs might have little or no validity outside the special classrooms.

Academic achievement is a crucial criterion of the effectiveness of alternative education. One author notes, that, despite the fact that many of these efforts "...were more concerned with affective or behavioral changes than basic skills, success in the latter tends to determine the ultimate fate of alternatives." Within this context, it is important that both standardized tests and other evaluations of progress be analyzed. Only an examination of data from both of these measures will provide information concerning the external and the internal validity of these curricula.

Small gains in achievement have been recorded in various alternative efforts. Unfortunately, many of these improvements have been registered outside the crucial language arts and mathematics areas. At the present time, substantial efforts remain to be carried out if alternative schools are to be justified on academic grounds.

More favorable results have been attained in affective concerns. Positive changes in attitudes, as evidenced by self-reported opinions and attendance rate increases, have been recorded. Yet these results remain to be translated into long term behavior patterns. Mechanisms which promote the development of work habits and responsibility among alternative school populations have yet to be demonstrated.

The academic and behavioral information concerning alternative approaches suggests that much remains to be accomplished. Unless increases in academic achievement can be produced among enrollees, non-traditional schools seem justifiable only as holding pens which keep

disruptive individuals out of regular classroom environments. Increases in enthusiasum will avail little if they cannot be translated into productive activities and habits. Positive attitudes which can be sustained only within the alternative school will soon disappear when the student encounters the larger society.

Such are the hard facts which seem to surround the alternative education movement. They are disconcerting, yet they seem to suggest other, more hopeful conclusions.

Above all, present data recommends additional experimentation in the area of alternative schools. The result of programs already undertaken suggests that additional planning, structure, and evaluation will be required for future efforts.

A number of abortive projects have apparently lacked well-defined goals. Authorities such as M. Scott Norton point out that the lack of a process of goal development will doom any alternative program from the outset.

Beyond goal development, effective planning demands a structured evaluation process. Project evolution must be monitored on a continuing basis. Students must be motivated through continuous application of academic and behavioral curricula.

Existing information also suggests that available resources must be applied in a manner more consistent than has hitherto been the case. A tremendous amount of effort is required for the operation of an alternative program. Disruptive students typically require much greater attention than those in regular classes. Often school districts do not possess all the resources necessary for the instruction of such individuals.

Accordingly, community involvement must be heightened. The need

for parental and community involvement in alternative education reinforces the need for structuring and systematization of these efforts. A wealth of local enthusiasm, injudiciously applied, may confuse the purpose and operation of even the most effective curriculum.

In addition to its importance to the success of individual non-traditional programs, proper planning and management is crucial to the general development of the approach. Because alternative schools are still at the demonstration and experimentation stage, replication of successful models, and avoidance of unsuccessful techniques, will be possible only if such developments are structured and documented. Success in this area has, admittedly, been something less than universal and the approach will profit from any additional documentation concerning methods and techniques.

Implementation of Alternative Programs

Analysis of past experiences in alternative education produces a number of conclusions. Yet the greatest challenge in this area is translation of the lessons gained from past experiences into positive, constructive efforts. Only through the development of worthwhile functioning structures will alternative curricula make significant contributions to American schools.

In the implementation of alternative approaches, major attention must be given to educational environments. Present experience suggests that even the most innovative projects will have greater chance of success if developed within established structures. Efforts which have attempted to operate outside traditional funding mechanisms or institutional frameworks have almost always met with failure.

This pattern has been particularly apparent in the cases of those

approaches which have been supported with new or nontraditional funding. Almost all efforts which have abolished existing financial supports, as well as existing learning frameworks have been short-lived. Adding financial innovation to the difficult task of curriculum innovation is apparently inviting disaster.

The best means of support for alternative projects seems to be the same funding which underwrites the rest of programming at the district level. Experience suggests that this approach can begin with very small expenditures, and expand if conditions dictate. If minimal amounts of money cannot be raised within district budgets, then the commitment necessary to begin alternative curricula itself may be lacking.

Experience also recommends that implementation of alternative curricula occur within established school organizations. For the most part, those programs which have attempted to function outside all of the constraints of traditional curricula have met with failure.

Implementation of alternative curricula within the frameworks of local districts is desirable for a number of reasons. It is an efficient course of action, taking advantage of the human and physical resources which exist within established structures. It is also practical, recognizing that through differing methods, alternative programs, like established curricula, must produce educated individuals. It is also realistic, carrying with it the assumption no effort can exist in a vacuum, outside the structures of direction and accountability which mark the remainder of the society.

The need to implement alternative education within existing funding mechanisms and school structures cannot be overstressed. Innovative curriculum development has always been a formidable task. Research demonstrates that the difficulties in this area often verge

on overwhelming. Under theses circumstances, to also attempt abolition of traditional financial supports and organizational structures is absurd. It will lead to failure of the demonstration effort itself, while wasting money that would have been more profitably employed in other areas.

Within the context of local districts, it is recommended that alternative curricula be designed and implemented in a highly structured manner. Through such an approach programs will be readily assessable by sponsored districts at periodic intervals. Successful efforts will also be replicable by other systems which desire to implement proven methodologies.

At the outset of any implementation process, program goals should be clearly defined and utilized. Too often, experience has shown that project goals remain vague or ill-defined. It is not enough for those involved to have "an idea" of what the goals are. These aims must be translated into concise sentences and committed to paper.

If a firmly structured process of goal-definition does not occur, project aims will shift as the effort develops, and fragmentation of the general direction will occur as staff turnover occurs and individual perceptions diverge. All of these factors will shift the original purpose of the program and water down its effect. In an area in which success has been the exception neither of these possibilities can be raised.

A number of goals for alternative curricula have been suggested in efforts already attempted. One of the most universal and worthwhile of these has been to provide the "educational experiences necessary to motivate the student to complete his or her education through the high school level."

Under this general heading, a number of contributing objectives have been recommended. These include:

1. "Fostering maximum positive change in each student by assisting in meeting the unique requirements of the individual's educational, social and personal life;
2. Providing special and educational skills necessary for positive personal development and to gain proper attitudes for successful involvement as a citizen in the community; and
3. Coordinating efforts with other school, community, and federal agencies and programs necessary to achieve these objectives."

Other goals and objectives for alternative programs have also been utilized. Work-study efforts have been implemented for those individuals who neither seek a high school diploma nor return to traditional school settings. General approaches have endeavored to build constructive attitudes without inculcating skills and knowledge. Other curricula have attempted to meet the needs of disoriented students. Specific objectives, such as those detailed above, have aimed at the attainment of these goals.

A Few General Conclusions

The preceding pages contain a wide range of information regarding the origins and development of alternative school programs. The path by which these efforts have reached the public schools has been delineated. The present record of such programs has been surveyed. Having waded through this mass of information, it becomes profitable to distill a few observations concerning the present status of this movement. Such conclusions might reflect the present state of the art as well as provide the basis for future efforts in this area.

Most questions concerning alternative schools properly revolve around outcomes. Because this approach is still at the demonstration stage, programs which are eventually replicated on a general basis will be those which produce results. Most studies and evaluations have focused on academic affective-behavioral results.

None of the conclusions outlined in the foregoing discussion should prove startling. If program implementation in alternative programs were an easy task, extensive surveys of approaches to the problem, such as that contained here, would be unnecessary.

Detailed structuring of alternative curricula, such as that detailed here is beneficial for a number of reasons. It allows for due consideration and hypothetical testing of possibilities before actual implementation occurs. It also enables implementation to occur within a general perspective. Finally, it promotes continuity of activity by suggesting subsequent steps. Thus, objectives form criteria for evaluation and evaluation suggests change.

As has already been noted, the extensive planning and implementation described here is no guarantee of success. Experience does recommend, however, that without them, <u>failure may be all but assured.</u> It is slight comfort that all of the effort in the world will not insure effective programming. Yet there is simply no other logical way to proceed.

Beyond all of these ingredients, a commitment to the success of alternative programming and a willingness to persevere in this endeavor are, of course, required. Such dedication and patience is necessary to turn the mechanisms suggested here into living, breathing efforts which will benefit scores of young people. This kind of commitment recognizes the challenge and complexity of this most difficult task, and approaches solutions in a reasoned, methodical fashion.

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